



The Play Sufficiency Duty and the roles of playworkers

This information sheet provides an introduction to the Welsh Government Play Sufficiency Duty and explores the roles of the playwork profession in helping to secure sufficient opportunities for children's play. The Welsh Government defines playwork as a 'highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances children's play. It takes place where adults support children's play but is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes' (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 38).

The Play Sufficiency Duty

Wales became the first country in the world to legislate specifically in support of children's right to play when the Welsh Government introduced the Play Sufficiency Duty in 2012.

The first part of this duty requires all local authorities in Wales to carry out an assessment, every three years, to establish the extent of children's opportunities for play and how the work of each local authority influences children's time, space and permission for play.

Based on the findings of their assessments, the second part of the duty then requires local authorities to take action to secure sufficient opportunities for play. This includes protecting and maintaining the opportunities that already exist as well as improving them 'so far as is reasonably practicable' (Welsh Government, 2014, p.5).

The overarching aim of the Play Sufficiency Duty is 'creating a play friendly Wales and to provide excellent opportunities for our children to play' (Welsh Government, 2014, p.6). It raises some important questions: What is sufficient in terms of play? How do we find out if children are getting enough? And what can we do to make sure they are?

When thinking about play sufficiency, it helps to think about play as the way in which children express themselves and experience the world around them. Children are playful and have a natural drive to play, meaning that they will play wherever and whenever they can (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). However, as recognised by the Welsh Government (2014), there are a range of factors that can constrain children's ability to find time and space for play.



Account-ability and response-ability

The Play Sufficiency Duty is clearly not just about playwork or even play provision. Rather it is concerned with cultivating more favourable conditions for play throughout all aspects of children's lives (which is ultimately what playwork is also concerned with). Lester and Russell (2013, 2014) suggest that the process of assessing and securing play sufficiency is dependent on both the 'account-ability' and 'response-ability' of adults:

- Account-ability – our ability to account for (identify) the ways in which we impact, both positively and negatively, on children's time and space for play
- Response-ability – our ability to improve our responses towards children and their play.

Whilst the Play Sufficiency Duty does not place a requirement on local authorities to provide a specified level of playwork provision, the statutory guidance does recognise the role and value of the profession and requires Play Sufficiency Assessments to take into account the extent to which the provision available is sufficient 'to meet the needs of children and their families' (Welsh Government, 2014, p.23). The assessment process therefore includes accounting for the ways in which playwork contributes towards securing sufficiency, producing evidence of what it is playworkers do to help. Additionally, these assessments may also reveal ways in which playwork might further develop to better respond to children's right to play.

Research with children

An essential part of local authority Play Sufficiency Assessments is carrying out research with children and their carers exploring the realities of their day-to-day experiences and the ways in which access to play is supported or constrained by the design of physical environments and the actions and attitudes of other people in them. This process, that may be supported by playworkers, reveals many issues that influence children's ability to find time and space for play – some of which would best be addressed at a neighbourhood level and others at a local or national government level but all of which are connected to each other.



For example, we know from research with children that their desire to play out and parents' confidence in allowing them to do so is dependent on the availability of other children to play with, the number and range of places to play close to their homes and people's sense of community safety. When environments feel less safe, children are less likely to be allowed out to play. The amount and speed of traffic and how well children and parents know other people in their communities therefore directly affect children's opportunities for play. The extent to which these issues and others impact on children's play varies for different people and across different communities.

Adult account-ability is therefore reliant upon hyperlocal research with children – recognising that children hold intimate knowledge about their local environments, which they experience differently to adults. The insights generated can help adults rethink their collective response-abilities towards children, revealing ways in which things can be done differently.



The role of adults

The Play Sufficiency Duty requires adults to pay greater attention to the multitude of issues that impact on children's lives and consider how the ways in which we do things could be changed to better support their right to play. It raises further questions about the ways in which we, as a society, think about children and their childhoods, how we plan for and design our neighbourhoods, educate and care for our children, the approach taken to adult-child relations, what we expect of parents and how we provide for play.

Ultimately, adults have responsibility for making it easier for children to find time and space for play. This includes helping other adults to feel confident in allowing and encouraging children to play. However, this is likely to require a significant shift in culture both within local neighbourhoods, improving people's sense of community and security, and within the organisations that adults work for, enabling them to adopt a more supportive and considerate approach to children's play.

Making and sustaining these changes will require the involvement of many people beyond playwork, who directly and indirectly impact on children's opportunities for play. This includes parents and carers, other adult residents, politicians, policy makers, and those involved in professions such as planning, housing, transport, community safety, education,

childcare. However, it is often playworkers who provide the dedicated and driving force also required to bring about these changes and who are at the centre of a growing network of people working to improve conditions for play.

How playworkers support play sufficiency

In their research exploring the ways in which local authorities have responded to the Play Sufficiency Duty, Lester and Russell (2013, 2014) highlight the work of geographer Ash Amin and his ideas on what constitutes a 'good city'. Amin identifies four 'registers' (perhaps most easily understood as ways of working) that Lester and Russell suggest can be combined to nurture a play-friendly country and create environments that are more 'open to children's playful presence' (Lester and Russell, 2014, p.4). These four registers are very briefly described below:

- **Repair and maintenance** – protecting and maintaining the times and spaces currently available for children's play as well as 'repairing' the way things work to improve children's access to time and space for play.
- **Relatedness** – paying attention to the ways in which adults think about, care for and interact with children, encouraging adults to recognise and value the ways in which children are different to them and how their actions might impact on children's ability to play.

- **Rights** – respecting children’s right to play and recognising that upholding this right is essential to upholding other rights associated with freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of association and peaceful assembly (gathering together) and freedom to participate in the public realm.
- **Re-enchantment** – looking at how people’s habits, routines and attitudes support or constrain play, then taking action to (gently) disturb the way things usually work to reveal how children’s environments could be made more conducive to playing.

Using this framework and examples from local authority Play Sufficiency Assessments, it is possible to identify some of the ways in which playwork

can contribute at both a local government level, working across policy areas, and operationally within local neighbourhoods to cultivate more favourable conditions for play.

For ease of understanding, these two aspects of playwork are described as ‘indirect’ and ‘direct’.

Indirect working refers to action taken ‘behind the scenes’ (often within organisations) indirectly benefiting children’s play by improving the ways in which adults support it.

Direct working refers to action taken with children, carers and other residents to co-create opportunities for play in local communities.



Primary focus	<p>Indirect – cultivating a culture of support for play within organisations.</p> <p>Direct – cultivating a culture of playing in local communities.</p>
<p>Repair and Maintenance</p>	<p>Indirect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading on the completion of Play Sufficiency Assessments and the implementation of associated action plans • Improving risk management policies and procedures so that they support rather than constrain play • Maintaining a focus on play, ensuring consideration is given to play during the planning of public services and spaces • Securing funding for play provision and evidencing the impact of play interventions against other funding priorities • Negotiating permission for children to use different spaces for play, for example school grounds outside of school hours. <p>Direct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating regular staffed play sessions close to people’s homes, encouraging children to play out together • Keeping an eye on children, thereby reassuring and reducing stress on parents • Normalising playing out and ensuring it is part of people’s everyday routines • Developing local knowledge of where children play and working to protect those places. • Helping to clean up and maintain community spaces where children can play.
<p>Relatedness</p>	<p>Indirect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and building relationships with adults who can make a difference in local communities, encouraging them to take action in support of play • Developing partnerships with people in other departments/organisations whose work impacts on children’s play • Facilitating conversations about play, enabling adults who work in different professions to develop a shared language and understanding of how to support it • Establishing and facilitating strategic networks, enabling people to work together in support of children’s play • Providing professional development opportunities to improve adult responses and support for play. <p>Direct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a consistent presence, a friendly face, in local communities • Getting to know and be known by children, parents and other residents • Talking to adult residents about the importance of play and encouraging them to re-think any fears or concern they may have for or about children • Helping people to become familiar with one another by facilitating community events.

<p>Rights</p>	<p>Indirect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocating for children’s right to play at a strategic level • Facilitating research with children to gather their views on their opportunities for play • Identifying groups of children or communities experiencing a lack of play sufficiency and taking action to address this • Ensuring attention is paid to children’s right to play through impact assessment processes • Challenging organisational practices that unnecessarily constrain children’s ability to play. <p>Direct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocating for children’s right to play at a local level • Identifying and providing additional support to individual children who are experiencing extraordinary barriers to accessing their right to play • Helping to address other problems in children’s lives that may be preventing them from being able to play • Enabling children to participate in local decision-making processes that impact on their opportunities for play, for example housing developments.
<p>Re-enchantment</p>	<p>Indirect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating what is possible, working with partners to try out different approaches to supporting play • Working with community stakeholders to develop plans for supporting children’s play • Sharing the findings of research involving children with politicians and policy makers • Organising large scale play events and developing publicity campaigns to promote children’s right to play • Putting up signs and symbols that promote and encourage rather than restrict play. <p>Direct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small-scale experiments that change the way people move through and use space • Working with children to create interesting and exciting places in which they can play • Taking over a residential street for a short time, allowing children’s play to take precedence over the movement of motor vehicles • Leaving evidence of children having played (like a bit of chalk), helping to further increase the visibility of children and remind people to be mindful of their existence • Introducing loose parts (junk materials) and a playwork approach into school playtimes.

This is far from a complete list of duties performed by playworkers, nor does it describe the highly skilled practices playworkers engage in when working directly with playing children, but it begins to illustrate the breadth of work undertaken within the playwork profession. Individual playworkers or teams of staff may be responsible for both these indirect and direct roles or may be employed to focus on one more than the other. Either way both types of working are necessary to create the desired shift in culture, which will take time, persistence and a particular set of skills (Long, 2017).

It is also important to recognise that, whilst being responsible for different aspects of work, playworkers fulfilling these indirect and direct roles are guided by the same principles of working with and on behalf of children (PPSG, 2005). This includes:

- Understanding and advocating for the intrinsic value of playing as a process
- Emphasising the importance of children enjoying their childhoods as well as developing the knowledge, skills and aptitudes that will serve them well as both children and adults
- Balancing the need to protect children from serious harm with the benefits of supporting them to engage with risk during their play
- Creating environments that are participative and inclusive and provide for a comprehensive range of rich opportunities for play
- Ensuring that when engaging with policy and workforce developments, children's right to play remains central to playworkers' involvement.



Conclusion

In the context of the Play Sufficiency Duty, the role of playwork might best be understood as a play centred approach to community development where more playing, and all its associated benefits, is the primary outcome (Tawil and Barclay, 2018). Playworkers operate within local neighbourhoods, community based organisations and across local government, working with children, carers, other local stakeholders, practitioners, policy makers and politicians to improve and protect conditions for playing.

Playworkers:

- support the development of positive attitudes towards children
- identify opportunities to develop and/or reclaim time and space for play
- advocate for a more playful approach to working with and on behalf of children
- make members of the community feel safer in allowing children to play out (Lester, 2016; Long, 2017).

By working in these ways playworkers are acting as advocates for children, mediating between adult and child-led agendas to encourage a more equitable distribution of community resources. At times this may mean defending children's rights, representing their views and reminding adults that children must also have access to time and space within the public realm. Where playworkers adopt this type of community development approach they help to cultivate a culture of play where adult views of play are more closely aligned with those of children and as a result there is a greater support for children's play throughout and across communities.

Whilst the Play Sufficiency Duty does not automatically guarantee the services of playwork it does give playworkers a legitimate 'seat at the table'. Furthermore, through skillful engagement and generating evidence from research with children and their carers, playwork emerges as the logical answer to many of the questions raised by the Play Sufficiency Duty.



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Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.